

# MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

## WINCHESTER

Report Date: 1981

Associated Regional Report: Boston Area

**Reconnaissance Survey Town Reports**, produced for MHC's Statewide Reconnaissance Survey between 1979 and 1987, introduce the historical development of each of the Commonwealth's municipalities. Each report begins with an historic overview, a description of topography, and political boundaries. For the purposes of the survey, the historic period has been subdivided into seven periods: Contact (1500–1620), Plantation (1620–1675), Colonial (1675–1775), Federal (1775–1830), Early Industrial (1830–1870), Late Industrial (1870–1915), and Early Modern (1915–1940/55). Each report concludes with survey observations that evaluate the town's existing historic properties inventory and highlight significant historic buildings, settlement patterns, and present threats to these resources. A bibliography lists key secondary resources.

Town reports are designed for use together with a series of town maps that demarcate settlement patterns, transportation corridors and industrial sites for each historic period. These maps are in the form of color-coded, polyester overlays to the USGS topographic base map for each town on file and available for consultation at MHC. For further information on the organization and preparation of town reports, readers should contact MHC.

Users should keep in mind that these reports are now two decades or more old. The information they contain, including assessments of existing knowledge, planning recommendations, understanding of local development, and bibliographic references all date to the time they were written. In some cases, information on certain topics was not completed. No attempt has been made to update this information.

Electronic text was not available for digital capture, and as a result most of the reports have been scanned as PDF files. While all have been processed with optical character recognition, there will inevitably be some character recognition errors.

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## MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

Date: 1981

Community: Winchester

### I. TOPOGRAPHY

Town occupies approximately 6.3 square miles of the Mystic River watershed. The town lies within a large valley at the head of the Mystic Lakes. At the center, the ground is barely 25 feet above sea level, while some of the hills rise over 200 feet at the valley's rim. The valley forms the pre-glacial course of the ancient Merrimack River, which flowed south through Horn Pond and the Mystic Lakes. Today, two streams feed the Mystic Lakes -- the Aberjona River (topographically still the Mystic River) upon which most of the 18th and 19th century mill sites were built, and Horn Pond Brook. Near the juncture of these two water courses were built the first bridge and mill in the town, and the site today remains the center of Winchester village. To the north, the floor of the valley slopes gradually upward to the higher ground on which Woburn stands.

Although most of the ponds along the Aberjona are manmade, Winter, Wedge, and Horn Ponds are all glacial kettle holes.

### II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Originally part of Charlestown grant with 1636 Eight Mile Line surviving as Lexington boundary. Much of area included within 1638 Waterfield division with subsequent formation of Woburn at Church-High Streets (1642). Formed as independent town of Winchester (1850) from portions of Woburn, Medford, Somerville and Stoneham within present boundaries with 1875 Horn Pond Mountain annex to Woburn.

### III. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Affluent suburban town on northern axis of metropolitan Boston. Located on Mystic Valley within highland front of Boston Basin. Productive fishing grounds along Mystic Lakes and Aberjona River with important native sites along western shore of Upper Mystic Pond, defined in mid-17th century as Squaw Sachem reservation with remnant population through Early Industrial Period. Part of mid-17th century Charlestown and Woburn grants with early mill site and bridge over Aberjona River at Winchester enter. Continued development as mill village in Mystic Valley during Colonial period with farms on highlands, including few 18th century houses and notable Canadian historic site on Ridge Street. Increasing linkage

with Boston along Mystic corridor during early 19th century along canal and railroads with surviving Federal and Greek revival on Cambridge Street. Transformation to suburban town by late 19th century with railroad commuting with well-preserved examples of Picturesque Victorian style around town center, on Church and Washington Streets including notably early Panel Brick houses in private compound and period workers housing along Aberjona valley. Continued expansion of suburban residential district during late 19th and early 20th centuries with elaborate period houses in Historic Revival styles along Everett and Wildwood Streets including some Mission stucco examples and architecturally important early Bungalow designs. Town center augmented with landmark brick Victorian buildings, including town hall and business blocks. Increasing suburbanization by mid-20th century along Mystic Valley highways with single family residential development in Neo-Colonial styles around Mystic Lakes and Winchester Highlands, connected by original period auto parkway through town center. Peripheral areas remained undeveloped with surviving greenhouses on Cambridge Street and light industrial district on Aberjona River. Present stability as affluent suburb preserves residential districts, while commercial pressure has caused loss of cohesive fabric around town center along Main Street and threatens historic integrity along Cambridge Street.

#### IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

##### A. Transportation Routes:

Important corridor of regional trails north along Mystic Valley from Boston Basin. Primary N/S routes from Mystic ford (Medford) follows Grove-Main to Horn Pond (Woburn) with ford site across Aberjona (now destroyed). Eastside branch from ford to Spot Pond (Stoneham) follows Washington-Forest Streets around Middlesex Fells with documented connector south from Grove Street to Woburn Street-Medford through Oak Grove Cemetery. Primary westside routes from Menotomy (Arlington) follows Mystic-Cambridge Streets to Shawshine drainage (Woburn) with cross connector to Horn Pond as Pond Street and presumed link to Aberjona ford along Everett Avenue. A highland trail from Shawshine to Menotomy (Woburn-Arlington) appears as Ridge Street with connectors to Mystic Ponds as Hutchinson Street and Vine Brook (Lexington) possibly as High Street around Smith Pond.

##### B. Settlement Pattern:

No documented period sites. Important multi-component fishing sites located along narrows of Mystic Lake on both east and west sides. Additional sites likely along Aberjona River and Horn Pond Brook as well as around Winter and Wedge Ponds. Wintering camps possible near small upland ponds.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Access to major seasonal fish runs in Mystic River and spawning ponds. Good though limited agricultural land. A diverse and varied terrain for gathering/hunting.

D. Observations:

Though not as rich as the Arlington plain located further down the Mystic, the Winchester plain was also a probable focal point for native settlement and resource gathering. Proximity to coast and lithic source areas further east were additional factors. Though probably a high density area for sites, many have been destroyed. Nonetheless, the affluent nature of the community (large house lots, preserved open spaces) may have allowed for some surprising site survivals.

Identity of period native occupants is not clear, apparently were Massachusetts but with links to native groups in the Lynn/Saugus area.

V. FIRST PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails remain as primary highways with improvement along N/S corridor as Cambridge and Grove-Main Streets with bridge across Aberjona ford (1641). Waterfield division lots set to Charlestown line as Church-High Streets (1638).

B. Population:

First settled 1640. No more than a dozen families by 1670.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Waterfield lots set out along Church-High Streets (1638) from Charlestown with mill-bridge site at Aberjona ford by 1640s. Town center during mid-17th century at Woburn along Main Street axis.

D. Economic Base:

Primarily agricultural economy. First grist mill built by Edward Converse, 1640 at Winchester centre.

E. Observations

Lands formally set aside for Squaw Sachem and tribe east of Mystic Lakes, 1638-39. Probably earliest native reservation in Massachusetts.

## VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

### A. Transportation Routes:

Highway system remained from 17th century with rebuilding of Aberjona-Converse bridge. Primary routes continue as (N/S) Cambridge and Main Streets along Mystic Valley with possible connectors as Cross and Everett Streets.

### B. Population:

Said to have been about 14 families in Winchester in 1680. Slow growth in the succeeding 100 years. Chapman reports only about 35 houses (perhaps 200 people) in 1798.

### C. Settlement Pattern:

Mill village development at Aberjona bridge during 18th century with taverns along Main Street axis.

### D. Economic Base:

Agriculture remained dominant, though through the influence of Woburn, already a leather town, a number of small shoe shops (home production) in operation by end of Colonial period. Several mills sites established along the Aberjona River and Horn Pond Brook, though dates unclear from sources.

### E. Architecture:

Residential: Very few houses survive from the Colonial period; only two are known; both of these are center chimney structures with "beverly jog" lean-tos. They probably date from the mid-18th century. At least one gambrel-roofed center chimney house survived into the 19th century and as 1820 view indicates also that at least a few gambrel-roofed cottages were built.

Institutional: One school is indicated on Cambridge Street; no other structures are known to have been built and none are believed extant.

Commercial: The Black Horse Tavern, on Main Street at the town center, is known, as is one other tavern, farther north at Main Street.

Industrial: Several grist and saw mills are indicated along the Aberjona River; none are known extant.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Road system intact from 18th century with improvement of N/S axis along Mystic from Boston as Middlesex Canal 1803. Canal route followed from eastside Mystic Lake across upper point to Edgewater Place and around Wedge Pond and Horn Brook as Sheffield-Fletcher-Palmer-Middlesex Streets with little surviving evidence of original bed. Cross connectors of period include Bacon and Swanton Streets.

B. Population:

Chapman estimates 1798 population at about 200 people in 35 houses. Figures are unavailable, but town appears to have experienced some growth probably 1815-1830 as shoemaking developed here and in Woburn. Population may have reached 400-500 by 1830.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Development continued at Aberjona mill site with additional growth along Middlesex Canal-Main Streets axis towards Woburn center. Secondary growth at Symmes Corner at Grove, Bacon and Main Streets by early 19th century.

D. Economic Base:

By 1794, 4 mills in operation on Aberjona and 2 on Horn Pond Brook. A large number of small shoe shops (35 by 1830s) supplemented basic agricultural economy. Robert Bacon producing felt hats on the lower Aberjona by 1825.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Many more houses survive from the Federal period than do from the Colonial; these include several imposing brick end houses as well as a number of twin rear wall chimney examples. A few houses incorporate elaborate leaded fan and side lights, but many, especially the twin rear wall chimney houses, are more simply detailed.

Institutional: No significant structures are known to have been built, although a few schools may have been constructed.

Commercial: Turnpike-related structures, such as taverns and blacksmith shops, are indicated and at least one, the Wood Tavern, a paired chimney, hip roofed Federal structure with two entrances, is known to have been built in the period; none are known extant.

Industrial: No known structures surviving, though some mills may have been built.

VII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highway and canal remain from early 19th century; improvement of N/S axis from Boston with Boston & Lowell railroad (1835) along east side of Mystic-Aberjona valley through Winchester center (west side branch to Woburn along Horn Pond Brook 1844). Middlesex Canal abandoned with rail competition by 1850s.

B. Population:

After 1835 rapid growth in population as a result of the Boston & Lowell Railroad. By date of town's incorporation, it had reached 1,353. It doubled in the succeeding two decades, though there was no appreciable growth during the Civil War. About 12% of the 1865 population gave their place of birth as Ireland.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Formation of town center at Aberjona mill village in 1850 from railroad development of 1840s. Suburban subdivisions laid along Main-Washington Streets and Church Street with workers district in valley at Swanton Street.

D. Economic Base:

Town owed its advance in this period to construction of the Boston & Lowell Railroad (1835). In 1836 village had blacksmith and wheelwright shop, small grocery store, and Cutter's Corn Mill (beginning then to saw mahogany). Speculation by S. S. Richardson cut short by Panic of 1837, but succeeded by Benjamin Thompson who moved his tannery from Woburn to Winchester about 1839. In the early 1840s Winchester centre appears to have fostered a number of innovative machinists connected with shoe and leather manufacture and with veneer cutting. The first Mass. cutting (as opposed to sawing) of mahogany veneers was done by

Harrison Parker about 1843 with machines of his own invention; Amos Whittemore (grandson of the Arlington card manufacturer) introduced machinery for pegging shoes about the same time; and Joel Whitney's machine shop became one of the first concerns in the country to manufacture leather-making machinery.

In the 1830s there were 35 small shoe shops in Winchester -- many of them along Richardson Row, now Washington Street. But with the coming of the railroad most of this activity appears to have been siphoned off to Stoneham and Woburn. The town's principal manufacturing activity became the production of leather. By 1855 there were 4 tanning and currying establishments, producing \$150,000 worth of leather.

Also in 1855 there were 5 manufacturers of piano-forte parts or cases -- an industry which had the second highest annual product value in town. Thirty-eight farms were listed in 1865, and large quantities of fruit (especially apples), vegetables, and beef were sent to market.

#### E. Architecture:

Residential: Only one highstyle temple front Greek Revival house survives (on Washington Street) but several more modest center entrance Greek Revival houses still stand as does at least one Greek Revival house in stone, the Jason Richardson house on Forest Street. In addition, many modest houses combining elements of the Greek Revival and the Italianate styles were built in the 1850s and survive today. More rarely, the Gothic and Greek Revivals were combined in cottages which feature steeply pitched wall dormers and, occasionally, pointed arch windows. By far the most prevalent house type, which was built in great quantity toward the end of the period as population increased, is the suburban Italianate house, found in both sidehall and center entrance plans. Asymmetrical towered Italianate villas, though less common, were also built. Very plain Italianate worker's housing was constructed at Baconville, just east of the Mystic Lakes.

Institutional: The first significant institutional construction took place in this period with several important buildings constructed; among them the Italianate First Congregational Church (1854) and the Lyceum Hall (1848), a brick Victorian Gothic building with Moorish elements designed by an architect named Voelckers from Boston (remodelled; lower floors surviving).



Commercial: Several commercial buildings were constructed in this period including Greek Revival stores and hotels, but none are known to survive.

Industrial: The Thompson Tannery, with a three story frame currying shop and a one story stone tannery, was built in 1851; no known structures extant.

## IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

### A. Transportation Routes:

Rail and highway system intact from mid-19th century. Suburban trolley routes extended to Winchester during 1890s with focus at town center; routes from Medford along Winthrop-Main Streets from Arlington along Cambridge-Church Streets, from Stoneham along Forest-Washington Streets from Woburn along Main Street.

### B. Population:

Substantial growth in the town hall about 1890 when streetcars and increasing affluence attracted an even larger population increase. Peak years of growth in this period were the decades 1890-1910 when the town grew on the average by over 220 people a year, reaching 10,005 by 1915. Of these, about 11% (936) were Irish, with smaller numbers from Nova Scotia (262), Italy (159) and Sweden (147).

### C. Settlement Pattern:

Winchester Center expands as civic and commercial center with affluent residential areas to west along Washington-Highland Streets from Medford and to east along Church-Wildwood Streets around Mystic Ponds. Workers district remains along valley rail corridor (Swanton-Main Streets) to Woburn.

### D. Economic Base:

The period saw the establishment of the town as a prosperous residential suburb with a few large factories, emphasizing leather and felt. The Bacon Felt Company, by this period the holder of numerous patents in felting machinery and polishing wheels, became the parent of a competitor, the Eastern Felt Company, established by former employees of Bacon. In the late 1890s, 4 tanneries were operating in Winchester, the largest of which was that of Beggs & Cobb, said to have been the largest tannery of upper leather in the world.

Other manufacturing enterprises included the Winn Watch Hand Factory, begun in Winchester about 1870 by two former employees of the Waltham Watch Company; and several machine shops producing shoe and leather making machines -- McKay Metallic Fastener Company (later acquired by United Shoe Machinery), Hutchinson Leather Machine Company, Whitney Machine Company, and Lamb & Nash Company. The Winchester Laundry, begun in 1898, became by 1930 (as New England Laundries) New England's largest laundry organizations.

#### E. Architecture:

Residential: Winchester's primary architectural resource is the wide range of highstyle, architect designed houses dating from the late 19th and early 20th century. These include important Queen Anne, Shingle Style, Colonial Revival and Craftsman houses of frame construction with many stuccoed and some panel brick and stone examples. Toward the end of this period, outbuildings of some earlier properties were being converted for residential use. In addition to the many highstyle, ambitious houses, there are many less pretentious houses which, if isolated from their highstyle context, would be exceptional examples of their style. There are comparatively few Second Empire and Stick Style houses. Simpler houses tend to be vernacular Queen Anne sidehall types and are concentrated northeast of Main Street at Hill Street and at Harvard and Irving Streets. There are a few three and four story brick Georgian Revival apartment blocks possibly dating as early as 1915 and one outstanding early Mission Style apartment block (c. 1910) on Church Street opposite the Episcopal Church.

Institutional: Most of Winchester's institutional buildings date from this period and include the Romanesque Town Hall (Rand and Taylor, 1887), Colonial Revival Fire Station (E. R. Wait, 1914), the Victorian Gothic Wyman School, several Georgian Revival schools of the early 20th century and many churches, among them the Gothic/Italianate St. Mary's (1876), the English Parish Gothic Unitarian Church (Perry, Dean, Hepburn, and Stewart Walker, 1899), and the Gothic Revival Church of the Epiphany (F. P. Smith, 1904).

Commercial: Despite considerable demolition, several commercial buildings survive at the town center; these include well-detailed Colonial and Romanesque Revival structures of two and three stories, most of which are constructed of brick. Among these are a few architect designed structures such as the Richardsonian Romanesque Winchester Savings Bank (Blaikie and Blaikie, 1892).

Industrial: Most of Winchester's surviving industrial buildings are utilitarian frame structures, but at least one well-detailed three story brick building, the J. H. Winn Watch Hand Factory (c. 1900), stands on Washington Street.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of streetcar lines during 1920s and upgrading of local roads as auto highways with N/S Mystic axis from Boston (Route 3 Cambridge Street and Route 38 Winthrop-Main Streets) through Winchester Center. Metropolitan District Commission parkway constructed along eastside Mystic Ponds (Mystic Valley Parkway); original bridges and lighting survive. Middlesex Fells, Border Road link to Medford, completed in 1930s.

B. Population:

In the 20 years between 1920 and 1940 the town added nearly 5,000 to its population, a growth only briefly restrained by the depression years. By 1940 the figure had reached 15,081, a figure that remained nearly constant during the war.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Continued expansion of suburban development around town center with affluent districts west along Cambridge Street-Mystic Lakes to Arlington and east along Highland Avenue from Medford to Winchester Highlands around Middlesex Fells. Modest residential and fringe industrial area remains along Swanton-Main Street rail-valley corridor to Woburn. Outlying farmsteads survive through mid-20th century along Ridge Street.

D. Economic Base:

By the 1920s, Winchester had relatively few manufacturing plants, though those that remained were, for the most part, of large size with large capitalizations. Both the Bacon and Eastern Felt companies remained active, and the Beggs & Cobb Tannery was in operation until 1957. The Whitney Machine Co. specialized in the manufacture of hide-working machines, and the J. O. Whitten Company, established by 1910 at the Maxwell tannery site, was one of two edible gelatine manufacturers in the area. Puffer Manufacturing produced soda fountains, carbonators, and marble work, and the William F. Baird Company was a leader in the development of refrigerated truck bodies.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Many ambitious Craftsman, Colonial and Tudor Revival houses continued to be built in wealthier neighborhoods northwest of the town center; in addition, a number of suburban houses with Colonial, Dutch and Tudor Revival examples in stucco and brick were built, with a very few multiple family houses, primarily two family examples.

Institutional: The Public Library, an austere Gothic Revival building in stone (Robert Coit with Liham, Hopkins, and Greeley, 1930), was completed along with at least one church and several Colonial Revival schools.

Commercial: The Locatelli Block, a two story brick Georgian Revival structure, was built in 1935, other commercial buildings completed in the period consist primarily of simple one story brick and concrete storefronts dating from the 1920s.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

No additional industrial structures were discovered beyond the seven (including two bridges) that had been identified by the Winchester Historical Commission. None of these appear to warrant National Register nominations.

XII. SOURCES

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